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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 000450

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SUBJECT: ASAD'S MESSAGE TO PARLIAMENT: "A TALENTED
STATESMAN READY FOR ANOTHER SEVEN YEARS"

Classified By: A/DCM William Roebuck, for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Syrian President Bashar al-Asad delivered a major foreign policy speech May 10, on the occasion of the inaugural session of the newly elected Syrian People's Assembly. The speech picked up some of the rhetorical flourishes Asad has relied upon in other speeches he has delivered over the past two years, but lacked the overall stridency or sense of urgency (bordering on incitement) evident in some of his previous efforts, including his "half-men" speech of August 2006 or his "resistance or chaos" speech delivered at Damascus University in November 2005. Some of the harsh rhetoric, for example on Iraq and the peace process, seemed designed to maintain a confrontational facade on policies or initiatives that in substance could be vulnerable to hard-liner criticism. Regarding Lebanon, Bashar staked out a confrontational position, noting repeatedly that Syria would not cooperate with any Lebanon international tribunal that is formed, if it infringed on Syrian sovereignty, and would refuse to turn over Syrian nationals to the tribunal's jurisdiction. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On May 10, Syria's President Bashar al-Asad delivered a speech to the newly elected Syrian Parliament. Transitioning quickly to foreign policy issues, which made up the bulk of the speech, Asad asserted that with regard to Iraq, Syria had expressed readiness to play a role in encouraging an "Iraqi national dialogue" and "a political process" for Iraq. He also made reference to "the essence of Syrian cooperation" on Iraq. Asad made clear that Syria was pursuing this policy for the sake of "the Iraqi people . . . and for stability in the region," rather than to help the U.S. withdraw its forces or "to serve the goals of other countries." Asad repeated the standard SARG call for a timetable for the withdrawal of what he described as "occupation forces" and criticized the recent deployment of additional U.S. troops in Iraq, indicating Iraq's problems needed to be addressed through political means.

¶3. (SBU) LEBANON/PROPOSED TRIBUNAL: Syria supports the achievement of a Lebanese accord to solve the ongoing political impasse there, stated Asad. He denied that Syria had a position on the proposed formation of an international tribunal. Despite the general attempt to sound conciliatory and to voice respect for "international legitimacy" and UN resolutions, Asad staked out a very hard-line position on the Lebanon tribunal, noting repeatedly that Syria would not cooperate with any tribunal that is formed, if it infringed on Syrian sovereignty, and would refuse to turn over Syrian nationals to the tribunal's jurisdiction. In a somewhat tortured, elliptical style, the Syrian President also

rejected reports that Syria had provided its reservations on the proposed formation of a tribunal (i.e. to the Saudis), noting that a group of "Arab lawyers" had passed on their comments but these did "not reflect Syria's position."

¶4. (SBU) ISRAEL-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT: In the opening of the most lengthy part of his speech dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Asad stressed that Syria is working to support the Palestinian Unity Government and the lifting of the "international siege on it" that aimed to undermined refugees' rights to return to their homeland. Asserting that there has been no progress on Syria-Israel peace negotiations, Asad went through a contorted effort to refute recent reports of secret Syrian-Israeli contacts. He insisted that Syria had "not authorized anyone to negotiate on behalf of us." While claiming that Syria is willing to return to the negotiating table without any pre-conditions, Asad noted that there are some "peace process requirements" for re-starting the Golan negotiations, including respect for UNSC resolutions 242 and 338, a land for peace basis for the negotiations, starting any new negotiations at the point where the old ones left off, and an honest broker. Asad also reiterated Syria's strategic choice for peace and but coupled it with his view that "Israel should unequivocally reiterate its preparedness to withdraw from the Arab territories it occupied in 1967.

¶5. (SBU) Asad suggested that the recent international isolation of Syria was aimed at breaking the country's opposition to U.S. and Israel policies. He insisted that this policy of isolating Syria had failed.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: While Asad's May 10 speech lacks some of

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the insistent paranoia and inciteful vituperation that characterize many of his speeches delivered over the past two years, it still contains its share of hard-line stridency, especially with regard to the Lebanon international tribunal.

Asad also seems to have reverted to a hard-line restatement of Syria's position on Golan negotiations, possibly to help cover the regime's evident discomfort that back-channel negotiations it had quietly blessed became so public (and reinforce its public bargaining position). Asad appears to have wanted to use this speech to position himself before Parliament, and the Syrian people, as a talented statesman -- defending the rightness of his previous courses of action -- and ready for another seven years of defending Syria's interests on the world stage.

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